

Faith's a tie amid U.S. diversity

BY TAMMIE SMITH

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There is faith that refers to a set of beliefs or creeds. The Christian faith, the Jewish faith, the Islamic faith, for instance.

Then there is the personal faith that refers to trust in God or a higher being — the kind celebrated today, Easter, but which is by no means limited to Christians.

"It's a kind of commitment of the heart ... that means that you are willing to walk through your life in trust that God is with you, that God knows you, that God has concern for you, that God is in charge," said Dawn DeVries, the John Newton Thomas Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond.

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In Flair

Stories of faith from people who say it's carried them through difficult times.

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Easter

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"Out of that trust, which we call faith, other virtues grow," she said.

A Gallup 2011 poll showed that more than 90 percent of Americans believe in God. That percentage has been steady over decades.

Most adults in the United States who identify with a religion say they are Christians, according to a different Gallup report based on interviews with 327,244 randomly selected adults. When asked their religious preference, 52.5 percent of respondents said Protestant or other Christian, and 23.6 percent said Catholic.

Some other findings from Gallup surveys:

◆ 94 percent of women say they believe in God, compared with 90 percent of men.

◆ 98 percent of people who identify as political conservatives say they believe in God, compared with 91 percent of moderates and 85 percent of liberals.

◆ About 84 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds believe in God, compared with 94 percent of people in older age groups.

"When we can trust God as being the great companion in our life, one who is taking care of us throughout whatever process we are walking through, it frees us up from anxious preoccupation with taking care of

ourselves, the nervous anxiety of finding our place in our world,” DeVries said.

“By being free, we can love, pay attention to the people around us. The other virtue that faith tends to give birth to is hope. That is to say when stuff is looking really bad, which inevitably happens in every human being’s life, you don’t assume all is lost.”

Faith is kind of a life stance, said the Rev. Ben Campbell, pastoral director of the Richmond Hill Community, an ecumenical Christian fellowship and residential retreat.

“Many people theologically define it as a sixth sense, that is, some of the most important things we need and need to know, we can’t know them with our five senses,” Campbell said.

“The things we need to see by faith are far more important than most of the other things we know,” Campbell said, explaining that faith helps us answer questions such as whether life is worth living, if love is possible, or whether we are ultimately alone.

Faith shapes people’s expectations, Campbell said. “When you say Jesus came back from the dead, you are also expressing a sense that we don’t face desolation on the other side of the grave, and that those who have gone ahead of us are still in some sense alive.”

Easter, DeVries said, is a primary symbol of Christian faith.

“You might say that the death of Jesus and his being put away in a tomb looked like the end of the story. Yet it had many more chapters to be written, obviously. Resurrection — it’s about faith, hope and love and the way that that guides you through really dark times and keeps you going. For Christians, that’s the heart of everything.”

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Faith and recovery

To hear Honesty Liller talk about her recovery and her faith, go to TimesDispatch .com, search: Easter.



JOE MAHONEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

“I’ve learned my higher power carries me through thick, thin, whatever,” Honesty Brackett Liller said about the faith that developed as she recovered from drug and alcohol addiction. Read more about leaning on faith, beginning on Page G1.